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## **Student-Teacher Relationships and Impacts of Goal Orientation, Personality, Socio-Economic Status, and Performance: An Examination of Those Served by Project GRAD Knoxville**

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Kensey Ruth Parker entitled "Student-Teacher Relationships and Impacts of Goal Orientation, Personality, Socio-Economic Status, and Performance: An Examination of Those Served by Project GRAD Knoxville." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science, with a major in Communication and Information.

Michelle Violanti, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Courtney Wright, Laura Miller

Accepted for the Council:

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Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

Student-Teacher Relationships and  
Impacts of Goal Orientation, Personality, Socio-Economic Status, and Performance:  
An Examination of Those Served by Project GRAD Knoxville

A Thesis Presented for the  
Master of Science  
Degree  
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Kensey Ruth Parker

May 2013

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## ABSTRACT

This study seeks to understand the importance of teacher student relationships and the impacts of goal orientation, personality, socio-economic status, and student achievement. The study used a sample of students served by Project GRAD Knoxville, a non-profit organization that serves students in the heart of the city. The sample consisted of 110 college students who have received a scholarship from the organization. The results show that learning goal orientation is a significant predictor of student-teacher relationships. Knowing a student's LGO and time spent discussing social topics can predict whether or not students will end up on academic probation 64% of the time. Females report higher levels of performance goal orientation than men.

*Keywords: goal orientation, personality, socio-economic status, student-teacher relationships, achievement*

## Table of Contents

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION .....	1
CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW .....	4
Goal Orientation.....	5
Personality.....	8
Extroversion.....	9
Openness to experience.....	10
Socio-Economic Status .....	11
The Student-Teacher Relationship.....	12
Communication.....	15
Engagement.....	17
Student Performance .....	18
CHAPTER 3 METHODS .....	20
Participants.....	20
Measures .....	21
Procedures.....	25
CHAPTER 4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION.....	26
LGO, PGO, and Communication with Instructor .....	28
Personality and Communication with Instructor .....	31
Sex Differences in Teacher Communication Frequency .....	34
Socio-Economic Status, Probation, and Teacher Relationships .....	35
Indicators of Teacher-Student Relationships .....	38
Indicators of Academic Achievement.....	40
<i>Post Hoc</i> Analyses .....	41
CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSIONS .....	43
CHAPTER 6 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH.....	44
CHAPTER 7 IMPLICATIONS .....	46
LIST OF REFERENCES .....	48
APPENDIX.....	58
VITA.....	65

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

The relationship between teachers and students is not one that is newly being examined. It is one of the relationships that is most studied, especially in the field of education. The educational field as a whole has focused on the relationship between teachers and students and its impact on the classroom. The educational body of knowledge is full of this type of literature. Specifically, the communication between teachers and students is something that has been linked to very positive academic outcomes such as persistence and higher levels of learning (Dobransky & Frymier, 2004; Jones, 2008; Pascarella, 1980; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Whether it is consciously thought about or not, the communication between teachers and students, perhaps the most integral part of their relationship, is related to student motivation, satisfaction, and even performance (Gelbach, Brinkworth, & Harris, 2012).

Students bring a variety of individual concerns to their own educational experience, and those stresses have a major impact on their academic performance (Haynes, 2002). Some students are known for being much more disruptive than others, perhaps because a parent has died or did not live with the student. Some students may be going through a difficult time that is only temporary, but very impactful to their personal and educational goals. Regardless of the concerns brought to the educational experience of students, those concerns would reasonably have an impact on the student both psychosocially and academically (Haynes, 2002). Those impacts are the things that community organizations seek to help students navigate.

Thus, this paper aims to investigate the relationship between teachers and students when that student group is from a very specific demographic: high school graduates served through a specific community organization known as Project GRAD.

Project GRAD is a 501(c)3 non-profit partnership between public schools and the private sector. A K-16 national education initiative, GRAD began as a scholarship program in



the Houston Independent School District (TX) in 1989 and now serves 149,000 youth in 247 schools in 22 communities across the United States ... many from low-income circumstances. GRAD is also impacting the future of our local region and city.

Established in 2001 GRAD Knoxville serves more than 7,000 students in 14 Heart of Knoxville schools and 80 higher education institutions. Excellence in education, particularly for young people in our urban neighborhoods, is vital for Knoxville's economic success (Project GRAD Knoxville, 2012, par. 1).

The students the organization serves are typically from a low socio-economic status. According to the organization's College/Career Support Coach, many of the students are first-generation college attendees. As a result, post-secondary education is a new concept for them and their families. Project GRAD Knoxville offers both financial and other types of support to help these students succeed. Project GRAD aims to assist students who are navigating post-secondary education by offering clarity about some of those concerns that can easily cloud the goals of students. For example, one of the members of the organization shared with researchers the impact of finances on students served by the organization. Many students that they serve are forced to take on outside employment in addition to attending school full time. Others are simply not able to attend post-secondary educational institutions because of a lack of financial resources.

Because of their circumstances, the students that Project GRAD Knoxville serves may have different approaches toward their educational goals and relationships with teachers than students from different backgrounds. This study provides insight into how those students approach a post-secondary education by examining student orientation toward education, personality characteristics, communication behaviors, and educational. Ultimately, the better the

organization serves its student population, the better the students' academic achievement and educational experiences.

## **CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW**

To understand the ways in which students have a specific orientation to the idea of learning in the classroom, it is necessary to have an even broader understanding of a person's motivation. Motivation is known as “a student tendency to find academic activities meaningful and worthwhile and to try to derive the intended academic benefits from them” (Brophy, 1987, p. 205). Many previous discussions about motivation have brought about the idea of “what” motivates people rather than “how” they are motivated. It is not simply something that people either deeply desire to pursue or desperately desire to flee (Pink, 2011). It is much deeper than that. To consider motivation as only something that people extrinsically experience provides an incomplete picture. It becomes necessary to consider the whole person and consequently, the intrinsic motivations that people possess. When students are intrinsically motivated, it can lead to feelings of “competence, autonomy, relatedness, and purpose” (Herman, 2012, p. 371).

Regardless of whether motivation is extrinsic or intrinsic, the motivation itself has significant positive effects on education (Craven & Yeung, 2008; Marsh & Scalas, 2010; McInerney, Yeung, & McInerney, 2001). A student's self-concept can potentially have a reciprocal effect on learning (Craven & Yeung, 2008; Marsh & Scalas, 2010). The more positive a student's self-concept, the more likely that it will positively affect the student's learning. The more positive student's self-concept, the more likely that student will learn. Also, motivation has significant effects on learning (McInerney, Yeung, & McInerney, 2001). The more motivated a student is to learn, the more likely it is that the student will actually learn. Additionally, students who value their educational experience have increased motivation to want to continue their education (McInerney, Dowson, & Yeung, 2005). This would have a significant impact on a student's desire to pursue an optional post-secondary education, which is precisely what Project GRAD Knoxville aims to encourage students to do. Allowing students to see their education as

something that is valuable and worth pursuing can at times be a difficult task, but still one that is necessary.

## **Goal Orientation**

Examining motivation in a more specific context, goal orientation is motivation related directly to the classroom. Goal orientation, with its roots in education and motivational psychology, began to be studied in the 1970s. Atkinson's theory of achievement motivation first postulated that individuals find motivation either from desiring success or from desiring to avoid failure (1964). Atkinson and Feather (1966) argued that individuals desire success or failure avoidance for a variety of reasons. They desire success based upon three factors: a need for success, the likelihood of succeeding at a particular task, and an incentive to succeed. Similarly, individuals avoid failure for three similar reasons: a need to avoid failure, the likelihood of failure at the given task, and the result of failure.

Later, Eison (1979) aimed to apply the theory of achievement motivation to a classroom setting. As a result, he divided these motivations into two types of orientations that students can possess: a learning orientation versus a goal orientation. A learning orientation was "the predominant attitude held by students who approached college as an opportunity to acquire knowledge and obtain personal and educational enlightenment" (Eison, 1979, p. iv). A goal orientation was defined as "an attitude held by other students that obtaining a course grade, in and of itself, is a reason for their being and doing in the classroom" (Eison, 1979, p. iv). This was congruent with the ideas of extrinsic versus intrinsic incentives in the motivational research, but had now been applied to the educational setting.

When it was originally studied, goal orientation had been thought of as a continuum from learning orientation to goal orientation (Payne, Youngcourt, & Beaubien, 2007). However, as

studies began to develop further, researchers began to define them as two separate constructs: learning goal orientation (LGO) and performance goal orientation (PGO) (Dweck, 1986). Researchers recognized that individuals can experience both constructs simultaneously and developed individual scales for each separate construct (Button, Mathieu, & Zajac, 1996; Eison, Pollio, & Milton, 1986). Perhaps if a student is majoring in one subject area, a student would have a learning goal orientation toward that particular subject area. If, however, there was another general education course that the student had to take but was not interested in, the same student could experience a performance goal orientation for that course. Button et al. (1996) argued individuals have multiple goals that can compete with one another. Based upon Festinger's (1957) Cognitive Dissonance Theory in psychology, we know that when individuals suffer from competing goals, they will take actions to reduce the amount of dissonance that they are experiencing. It, then, would stand to reason that there would be some sort of response from those experiencing dissonance. Considering optional post-secondary education, when students experience dissonance by suffering from both LGO and PGO simultaneously, they would be more likely to become frustrated because of the dissonance. It may even lead to paralyzation on the part of the student, which could impede the student's academic success.

Those who have studied both learning goal orientation and performance goal orientation have suggested that these constructs should be broken down even further (Elliot, 1994; VandeWalle, 1996). Considering performance orientation, Elliot (1994) argued that it should be broken down into separate approach and avoidance ideas. The performance approach goal was understood as the desire for approval of performance by others, while the performance avoidance goal was a desire to avoid negative perceptions of others (Payne et al., 2007). VandeWalle (1996) recognized the same two distinctions but referred to them as prove performance goal

orientation (PPGO) and avoid performance goal orientation (APGO). PPGO addressed an individual's desire not only for approval, but also to prove one's competence at achieving a particular goal. APGO considered the desire not to have one's competence thought lesser of by not succeeding. Consequently, students who are goal-oriented, regardless of which type, believe that help seeking makes them feel threatened (Alextich, 2002). They also have been known to take shortcuts to get the highest grade for the least amount of work (Williams & Frymier, 2007). If students are entering the classroom with either of these types of motivation, their educational experience would be drastically different than those entering with a learning goal orientation. For the purposes of this study, however, goal orientation is what is examined. Regardless of the motivation of the goal orientation (either prove performance or avoid performance), the student responses all stem from extrinsic motivation. Thus, this study examines performance goal orientation as a whole and not its two types individually.

Students adopting a learning goal orientation have a desire to be enlightened. They "enjoy learning and view education as a means for developing intellectually and personally" (Williams & Frymier, 2007, p. 250). Their motivation is not from any type of desire for recognition or fear of failure. Theirs is intrinsic and considerably more private. Students who believe that their intelligence is something that can be changed are more likely to use LGO rather than students who believe that their intelligence cannot be altered (Dweck, 1986). These types of students are not likely to sway in their aspirations (Alextich, 2002), are more equipped at self-motivation (Beck, Rorrer-Woody, & Pierce, 1991), and report better achievement than goal oriented students (Page & Alextich, 2001). Several researchers (Conroy, Elliott, & Hofer, 2003; Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2000; Pintrich, 2000) have suggested that LGO should also be divided into separate approach and avoidance ideas just as performance goal orientation has been;

however, little research has been done to support it. Thus, it is typically thought of as one type of orientation rather than separate ideas combined.

Specifically for Project GRAD Knoxville, having an understanding of whether its students adopt a learning goal orientation or a performance goal orientation would have an impact on how to support the student. Perhaps, if the student used PGO most frequently, the organization could offer support to that student by offering incentives or even showing disappointment when students have not been successful. If a student most frequently used a LGO, it would stand to reason that the student would be motivated much more intrinsically. This would change the way that the organization sought to support that student. The organization could show the student how much he or she had already learned, and challenge that student to learn as much as possible before leaving the course. Consequently, having a better idea of the ways in which these students are entering the classroom can shed some light on the ways that they are motivated. Understanding that can lead to suggestions for the students to be even more successful and for the organization's continued support. As a result, the following hypothesis will be examined:

H1: Both learning goal orientation and performance goal orientation will lead to more frequency of communication with instructor.

## **Personality**

Personality has been studied extensively in the field of psychology. It is "the set of underlying traits that determines how an individual typically behaves, thinks, and feels" (Medford & McGeown, 2012, p. 787). It is a central function of a person's being that causes the person to act in consistent ways across various circumstances (Wille, Fruyt, & Feys, 2013) and has been linked to motivation in a variety of ways (Medford & McGeown, 2012). In fact,

perhaps motivation is linked more closely to a person's personality than one would realize. This would have a drastic impact upon a student's experience in the classroom. If a teacher had an extremely aggressive, introverted personality, students may feel uncomfortable approaching the instructor. A teacher's personality can affect the student's experience in the classroom (Awopetu, 2011), so it stands to reason that the same would be true about students' personalities. A more extroverted student might be more likely to initiate conversation with his or her instructor. The effects of student-initiated communication with instructors can have positive effects on the student's educational experience, so it would also seem apparent that their experience would be affected by personality in the same way. Subsequent research about personality has led to the suggestions of the "Big Five" personality traits: conscientiousness, agreeableness, neuroticism (which is referred to as emotional stability), openness to experience, and extroversion (Goldberg, 1990; Digman, 1990). Other measurement tools of personality all attempt to measure at least one of these five dimensions (Goldberg, 1990). The "Big Five" is one of the most widely studied models of personality (Major, Turner, and Fletcher, 2006). For the purposes of this study, only extroversion and openness to experience are examined.

### *Extroversion.*

Extroversion has been defined more by its characteristics than by a set of terms created to seek out its meaning. Being an extrovert is seen as being sociable, forceful, energetic, adventurous, enthusiastic, and outgoing (John & Srivastava, 1999). Typically, a person who would score high in this range would score low on neuroticism. Individuals who are high in extroversion typically seek out multiple solutions to their problems, can manage multiple conflicts at a time, and have a higher life satisfaction (Wille et al., 2013). Extroversion is linked to lower levels of cumulative unemployment and fewer unemployment situations (Viinikainen &



Kokko, 2012). Extroversion has been shown to be positively related to motivation to learn (Major et al., 2006). These characteristics would appear to make a proactive student, however, does that mean that all hope is lost if a person scores low on this construct? One would hope not. Consequently, this study aims to investigate this construct further and its links to education.

H2: When a student scores high on extroversion, he or she will also score high on frequency of communication with instructor.

### *Openness to experience.*

Just as extroversion, openness to experience has also been defined more by its characteristics than by anything else. Being open to experience is often seen as being imaginative, artistic, curious, excitable, unconventional, and as having wide interests (John & Srivastava, 1999). Individuals who score high on this construct are typically curious, broad-minded, and intelligent (Wille et al., 2013). They have been shown to have more academic motivation (Major et al., 2006) and are more engaged than others (Medford & McGeown, 2012). Thus, these traits suggest that these individuals enjoy seeking out new experiences. They are intrigued by new opportunity. They would most likely be risk-takers. Previous research linking personality and learning has shown that high levels of openness can lead to higher levels of academic motivation and engagement (Komarraju & Karau, 2005). Also, this trait has been linked to having favorable attitudes toward learning (Wille et al., 2013). Students with this personality trait would appear to be extremely open to trying new educational opportunities, and would not seem to be frightened or intimidated by seeking out communication with their instructors. This study seeks to aim whether or not these students would have a tendency to behave in one way or another depending on their openness to new experiences. Would these

students seek out communication encounters with their instructors? Would they be likely to have frequent communication with them? This study seeks to find answers to those questions.

H3: When a student scores high on openness to experience, he or she will also score high on frequency of communication with instructor.

## **Socio-Economic Status**

Considering the specific population of students served by Project GRAD Knoxville, the construct of socio-economic status cannot be ignored. While much research has not been done linking all of these traits together, there has been some research examining the impact of a student's race and socio-economic status on communication with instructor (Kim, 2006; Kim & Sax, 2009).

Several studies, however, have been done to synthesize the overarching themes in socio-economic status and achievement as a whole (Sirin, 2005; White, 1982; White, Reynolds, Thomas, & Gitzlaff, 1993). Research findings have been somewhat conflictual (Sirin, 2005; White, 1982). The main reason presented for this is that socio-economic status can be defined and consequently measured differently depending on what each study aims to accomplish.

Because researchers use different definitions of SES, measure student achievement in different ways, study a variety of age groups, use different types of analytical methods, use both aggregate and individual data, and conduct studies during years of varying national economic health, it is not surprising to find studies reporting such different results (White, et al., 1993, p. 329).

Thus, there are not many overarching themes in the literature linking socio-economic status to achievement, but there have been several individual studies done that show more specific relationships between those variables.

Kim (2006) noted that for white students, educational aspirations could be affected by student-faculty interactions, but that was not the case for African-American students. Also, first generation college attendees were not as satisfied with the student-teacher interactions as non-first-generation attendees (Kim & Sax, 2009). Perhaps first generation college attendees did not have the necessary knowledge from that those whose parents had attended college already had. Because of this lack of experience in a post-secondary educational setting, it could speak to why those who were first-generation attendees were not as satisfied with interactions. Kim and Sax (2009) found a positive relationship among social class, frequency, and satisfaction with teacher interaction: African-Americans tended to interact more frequently with their instructors, but those who were first-generation college attendees interacted with their instructors outside of class less frequently than non-first-generation attendees. Perhaps if students were communicating more frequently with their instructors, it would have an impact on their educational experience.

If this research is accurate, then what effect would there be for the students served by Project GRAD Knoxville? A large group of those served by the organization are African American and many are from a low social class. The impact of likelihood of interaction with instructor would surely have an impact on the student's learning and, ultimately, their achievement.

RQ1: What is the relationship between socio-economic status and probationary status?

RQ2: What is the relationship between socio-economic status and student-teacher interaction?

### **The Student-Teacher Relationship**

Student-teacher relationships are integral to a student's success. They can lead to academic and motivational outcomes (Juvonen, 2006). When these relationships are healthy, it

leads to a positive classroom environment (Opdenakker, Maulana, & den Brock, 2012), more success on tests and overall classroom grades (Goodenow, 1993; Midgley, Feldlaufer, & Eccles, 1989), more classroom motivation (Goodenow, 1993), and can even have a moral effect on students based upon their teacher's interaction with them (Arthur, 2011). Additionally, a negative relationship between student and teacher can negatively impact a student's achievement (Hamre & Pianta, 2001) and learning environment (Opdenakker et al., 2012). If this relationship has such a significant impact on students, and their experience, Project GRAD Knoxville may be interested in seeking out how its particular population of students is communicating with its instructors and how the student teacher relationship is impacting the students overall. It could lead to a better understanding of why students are communicating the ways they are and how that relates to their achievement.

Specifically related to motivation, there is a connection between student relationships with teachers and motivation in the classroom: the more positive the relationship, the more motivated the student (Opdenakker et al., 2012). It is not just the teacher's responsibility to initiate relationships with their students. Students have a responsibility as well. They can shape the interactions that they have with the teachers (Nurmi, 2012). Teachers also are more likely to respond positively to students who demonstrate comfort and competence while communicating with them (Toumaki, 2003). These positive responses, which could include encouragement, having patience with students, and additional help, are likely to be related to the student's motivation in the classroom.

Considering the interests of Project GRAD Knoxville and the fact that many of the students served by the organization are not at all familiar with a post-secondary educational experience, there could be some communication apprehension when communicating with

instructors. This could lead to negative perceptions from the instructor if students could not exhibit competence in their communication. If that is the case, the organization should begin to focus on teaching students how to be more effective communicators.

Many researchers have also studied the impact of the student-teacher relationship and its relationship with student learning (Christophel, 1990; Frymier, 1993; Mazer, 2012; Richmond, Gorham, & McCroskey, 1987). The teacher can effectively communicate concepts, receive high assessment ratings from students, and be a support system for a student. However, if that is the gauge by which success is rated, that may not lead to overall success for the student. While it is true that teachers have a vital impact on the things that students are learning in the classroom, it does a student a great disservice if the entire responsibility of learning is on the teacher. When the class is over and a grade for a student has been recorded, that teacher is no longer able to be a support system for the student in subsequent courses. Thus, it becomes much more important to gauge the role of the student as an indicator of success rather than the role of the instructor. Instructors can impact success for one particular course, but if it is desired to determine a student's overall success, the responsibility is that of the student.

[Engaged students] often have the opportunity to listen attentively, verbally contribute during discussions, take notes, and ask questions of instructors. Students might prepare for a class by reading assigned material, reviewing notes, studying for a test or quiz, completing assigned homework, and talking about class content with friends. They might think about how the course material relates to their lives, how they can utilize their new knowledge and skills, and how the class content will benefit their future careers. Notably, research suggests that interested students who spend the most time engaged in [the class] experience the highest levels of academic achievement (Mazer, 2013, p. 89).

This study aims to gauge student engagement in the student-instructor relationship by examining the frequency of communication with an instructor that the student initiates outside the classroom in hopes of examining the relationship between communication with a teacher and a student's overall academic achievement.

*Communication.*

Communication that occurs between teachers and their students has an impact on the student's overall educational experience (McCroskey & Andersen, 1976). The intimacy and immediacy that teachers show to their students can lead to higher levels of learning for students (Dobransky & Frymier, 2004). Also, teachers who offer out-of-class support increase student motivation and satisfaction (Jones, 2008).

While the role of the teacher's communication with students is vital, perhaps even more telling is a student-initiated conversation with a teacher. It gives students an opportunity to ask questions, to give the instructor feedback, and can even be linked to performance (McCroskey & Andersen, 1976). Often, students view interaction with faculty as something beneficial (Cotten & Wilson, 2006), and student-centered classrooms have been linked to higher levels of learning (Dobransky & Frymier, 2004). Out-of-class communication has also been linked to higher levels of academic development (Terenzini, Pascarella, & Bliming, 1996) and higher educational goals for themselves (Pascarella, 1980; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Student interaction with instructor could also be linked to the student's personality characteristics more than a teacher's actions within the classroom (Williams & Frymier, 2007).

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, out-of-class communication has been linked to higher rates of persistence (Aylor & Opplinger, 2003) and overall classroom experience (Jaasma & Koper, 1999). Since out-of-class communication has been linked to higher rates of retention

(Aylor & Opplinger, 2003; Milem & Berger, 1997; Nora & Cabrera, 1996; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Pike, Schroader, & Berry, 1997), Project GRAD Knoxville should begin to consider the impact of out-of-class communication on the students the organization serves. If retention and persistence is a goal of the organization, then it is important to see how this type of communication would relate to the students who are served by the organization, particularly those of a low socio-economic status. Retention is obviously a consideration of institutions, so it is important to consider how rates or persistence can be impacted by out-of-class communication with instructors. While this study is not longitudinal, it does seek to examine how that communication impacts overall achievement. This could be indirectly to persistence, since achievement is a requirement for completion.

This type of communication, although incredibly helpful, has still shown itself to be somewhat rare. Fusani (1994) found that 23 percent of students had never even instigated conversations with their instructors outside of class, and 50 percent of students had only one or two contacts with them. When faculty reported teaching a total of 81 students, they only had an average of 11 students seek out help outside of class (Nadler & Nadler, 2000). Jaasma and Koper (1999) found that half of the students used in their sample had never pursued communication with an instructor outside of class. This could be due to the reasons pointed out by Martin, Myers, and Mottet (2002): anxiety, lack of motivation to succeed in the class, lack of liking the instructor, and fear of labels from other student peers, lack of time, and lack of official office hours. Lack of time was also a significant deterrent identified by Cotten and Wilson (2006) along with class size. The less time that a student has, the less likely it is that the student will use that time to pursue academic endeavors.

In order to have an understanding of what type of communication is taking place, it becomes necessary to have an operational definition of the specific type of communication that takes place outside of class. Bippus, Brooks, Plax, & Kearney (2001) defined it this way:

Informal faculty-student interaction that occurs beyond the realm of formal in-class instruction... a wide variety of informal faculty-student contact such as that which occurs before and after class, in or outside of the physical classroom setting, spontaneously on campus, during official office hours, by appointment, or via technological mediums such as the telephone or the internet (p. 16).

For the purposes of this study, extra-class communication will be understood in this context.

Regardless of the purpose of the communication or the frequency of past reported interaction, it becomes necessary for Project GRAD Knoxville to understand whether its students are currently communicating with their teachers. If not, then training about communication needs to take place. If so, there needs to be investigation to determine whether that communication is related to academic outcomes.

RQ3: What combination of socio-economic status, student orientation, and personality best predicts how students communicate in the student-teacher relationships?

### *Engagement.*

Student engagement also impacts their classroom experience. Research has shown a link between classroom discussion and classroom engagement that can lead to better achievement scores (McElhone, 2012). There has been an increase in recent studies to examine the ways in which a student's engagement can be impacted by sex. For example, women typically are more likely to participate in more activities that contribute to their learning and spend more time preparing for class (Sander, 2012). They do, however, also experience more stress and less



confidence than men. Men, on the other hand, spend more time doing idle activities and relaxing, but are more likely to be more engaged with their professors (Sander, 2012). Additionally, women work harder up front to turn in a piece of work that is flawless, while men will not work as hard, but will have more engagement with their instructors following up on their work (e.g., to contest a grade) (Sander, 2012). Females also typically rate their instructors as more positively than do their male peers (Opdenakker, et al., 2012). Project GRAD Knoxville needs to consider how these sex differences affect its specific population in order to continue to serve the students of the organization well.

H4: Women will report more frequent interactions with teachers than men.

### **Student Performance**

A student's academic performance is truly the gauge by which people determine a person's intelligence and success. "Academic performance reflects how well an individual performs on various academic-related tasks over a period of time. It is an indicator of learning, but can also be an indicator of motivation, time management, and written communication skills" (Payne et al., 2007, p. 133). Performance is really the only indicator by which to measure a person's success. Thus, it can be impacted by many different variables.

Much research has been done linking performance to other aspects examined in this study. Student achievement is significantly impacted by student motivation and self-concept (McInerney et al., 2001). Further, the higher a student's academic self-concept, the higher the student's academic achievement (Marsh & Scalas, 2010). Thus, the relationship between self-concept and achievement cannot be ignored. Additionally, students who adopt a learning goal orientation in the classroom show higher levels of achievement (Harris & Harris, 1987). In order

for the students served by Project GRAD Knoxville to be able to be successful, it is important to keep those relationships in mind.

RQ4: What combination of socio-economic status, student orientation, personality, and student-teacher interaction best predicts a student's academic achievement?

## CHAPTER 3 METHODS

### Participants

Participants for this study were the college students that are served by Project GRAD Knoxville. They were all at least 18 years of age, and did not exceed age 25. Initially, all 310 students served by Project GRAD were contacted to participate. Out of a total of 110 participants who began the survey, only 73 of those surveys were completed (23.5 percent response rate), and therefore usable. From a meta-analysis conducted by Sheehan (2001), in the year 2000, mean response rates were at 24% and were expected to steadily decrease. “Thus, as time progresses, it seems likely that response rates to e-mail surveys will continue to decrease” (p. 3). Of those 73, 41 indicated that they were female, 23 indicated that they were male, and 9 chose not to respond. Participants were 59.7 percent African American, 29.9 percent White, 1.5 percent Hispanic, 4.5 percent Multiracial, and 4.5 percent other. Participants had attended some type of post-secondary education, and had received a scholarship from the organization. Participants represented many different educational institutions, but most of those institutions were in the southeastern United States. According to the organization, the most common examples of institutions where students were enrolled were the following: The University of Tennessee, Middle Tennessee State University, East Tennessee State University, Tennessee State University, and Pellissippi State Community College.

Participants were gathered from the organization. Their identities remained confidential. The researcher of the study was the only one with access to the information while data collection was ongoing. Participants were emailed and asked to participate in the voluntary study. In the email, a link to the study was included. For those without email access, paper copies of the survey were distributed by mail and in the Project GRAD offices. The researcher manually keyed in those responses so that those without technological access were still represented.

Participants were asked to provide a small amount of demographic information listed at the end of the given survey (see Appendix for Survey Instrument).

Participants identified themselves in the following manner: 75 percent indicated they were raised in a single-family house rather than apartment, condominium, etc.; 50 percent identified themselves as either upper middle class or middle class while only 9.4 percent identified themselves as working poor or poor; 35.4 percent identified that they or someone else in their immediate household was the recipient of food stamps; 12.5 percent identified that they or someone else in their immediate household was the recipient of Medicare or Medicaid benefits; 37.9 percent indicated that they had been on academic probation or at risk of losing scholarship money due to a low GPA.

## **Measures**

The first scale measured two facets of personality: extroversion and openness to experience. Items were taken from the professional personality questionnaire (Kline & Lapham, 1991). First, items were limited to those dealing only with extroversion and openness to experience, the subscales. Then, items whose wording could have been confusing were eliminated or rephrased. This left the measure to include seven items for both extroversion and openness to experience, reaching a total of 14. Participants read statements about their preferred school life. They then answered yes or no as to whether or not the described setting would be appealing. Sample items included: “I am often the center of attention,” and “I rarely go into school knowing exactly what I’ll be doing every hour; I just have a general idea and take things as they come.” Each subscale of the professional personality scale had an alpha reliability above .70 or above in previous research (Kline & Lapham, 1991). A “yes” response to an item indicated how they would prefer their school life to be and was coded as a two. A “no” response

to an item indicated how they would not prefer their school life to be and was coded as a zero. The extroversion scale (min=0, max=14,  $M=7.10$ ,  $SD=2.94$ ) had 89 valid responses while the openness to experience (min=0, max=14,  $M=5.33$ ,  $SD=3.18$ ) had 87. For this particular study, the extroversion scale had a reliability of .418 while the openness to experience scale had an alpha reliability of .545. Looking at the alpha reliability for the scale if an item were deleted did not reveal specific issues with the scale nor did it indicate that the scale would be improved significantly with fewer items. Thus, for the purposes of this study, students were divided into high (scores of 11 to 14) and low (scores of 7 to 10) extroversion and openness to experience for analysis purposes.

The second scale aimed to measure one's goal orientation as either learning or performance and was established by Button, Mathieu, & Zajac (1996). There were two separate scales, 10 items each, used for learning and goal orientation. Respondents read a statement and rated on a Likert scale (1=Disagree Strongly to 7=Agree Strongly) the extent to which they agreed with the statement. Sample items included: "I feel smart when I can do something better than most other people" (PGO) and "The opportunity to do challenging work is important to me" (LGO). The performance goal orientation scale had an alpha of .76 while the learning goal orientation scale had an alpha reliability of .79 in previous research (Button, et al., 1996). The learning goal orientation and performance goal orientation scales for this study had alpha reliabilities of .866 and .712, respectively. The learning goal orientation scale (min=33, max=70,  $M=59.69$ ,  $SD=8.34$ ) had 70 valid responses while the performance goal orientation scale (min=31, max=70,  $M=53.68$ ,  $SD=8.16$ ) had 75 valid responses. Total scores on each scale were used for analysis purposes.

The final scale measured students' extra-class communication with instructors (Fusani, 1994). The first 3 questions asked the students to report how many times they had interacted with their instructor outside of class and the nature of that communication. The first 3 questions asked the students to report how many times they had interacted with their instructor both before and after class ( $\text{min}=0$ ,  $\text{max}=90$ ,  $M=14.10$ ,  $SD=17.82$ ) and visits to instructors' office hours ( $\text{min}=0$ ,  $\text{max}=50$ ,  $M=5.91$ ,  $SD=10.99$ ). Students were asked about the percentage of time devoted to the following three topics: course topics ( $\text{min}=0$ ,  $\text{max}=100$ ,  $M=51.16$ ,  $SD=34.42$ ), personal problems/advice seeking ( $\text{min}=0$ ,  $\text{max}=100$ ,  $M=23.34$ ,  $SD=26.40$ ), and social topics ( $\text{min}=0$ ,  $\text{max}=90$ ,  $M=16.85$ ,  $SD=22.25$ ). The total number of times students talked to their professors was measured as well ( $\text{min}=0$ ,  $\text{max}=100$ ,  $M=20.22$ ,  $SD=25.53$ ).

The following 21 questions on the extra-class communication scale asked students to rate whether they agreed with the given statements. The original scale asked participants to rate the statements from 1-100 (1=Strongly Disagree; 100=Strongly Agree). To avoid confusion for participants, this study adopted a 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) range just as the other scales had used. Sample items from the scale included: "How many times have you visited the instructor's office this semester" (first three open-ended questions) and "Most office visits are useful educational experiences" (Likert scale questions). Because this scale was created before technology was a prominent means of communication between instructors and students, three items were added to the scale: "I have often communicated electronically with my instructors outside of class"; "Communicating electronically with my instructors has improved my motivation in courses"; and "Communication electronically with my instructors has improved my confidence in courses." This scale had 62 valid responses ( $\text{min}: 68$ ;  $\text{max}.: 139$ ;  $M = 98.55$ ;  $SD = 16.97$ ). The alpha reliability for the scale was .83 in previous research (Fusani, 1994). For this study, this particular

scale had an alpha reliability of .868 with the added electronic communication items so they were retained for analysis purposes.

One additional item was added to the survey to determine whether students are communicating similarly with their college instructors as they do with their high school instructors: “I communicated with my high school instructors more than I do in college.” The mean for this item was 4.6 indicating that they communicated slightly more with their high school instructors than they do with their college instructors.

Additional items were created asking students to classify their perceived socio-economic status. Sample items included: “Does anyone in your family currently receive food stamps” and “How would you classify your family growing up” with answer choices ranging from upper class to poor. One of the SES items asked about how many people in the student’s immediate household fit into various working types. Working from the assumption that people who were employed for wages or students were doing everything they could to improve the family’s SES, the number of people in each of those categories was added to the following two employment types. Assuming that being self-employed, looking for employment or being retired would contribute to SES, the number of people in each of these categories was multiplied by two. Assuming that not looking for work, being unable to work, and staying at home were least likely to contribute to SES, the total number of people in these categories was multiplied by 3. Higher total scores on the SES scale created by adding the three employment types indicated lower SES, which is consistent with how other SES items were scored on the survey (min: 18; max: 34;  $M = 22.41$ ;  $SD = 3.82$ ). The survey closes with questions about the participants’ academic standing, sex, age, and race, the descriptive statistics of which were reported under participants.

## **Procedures**

Each participant was given the exact same survey and instructed that he or she was not required to complete the study if for some reason there were personal biases, scheduling conflicts, etc. that prevented survey completion. Should that be the case, the participant was informed that he or she was allowed to exit the survey at any time and would not be penalized in any way for not completing it. The researchers were the only ones who had access to the online survey responses. Participants completed their surveys individually and submitted them to the researcher online by completing the given questions. They were informed the research was for a project and only those willing to have their data recorded participated. In order for participants to consent to the research, each participant was required to read a consent form (see Appendix) prior to completing the survey. By reading the consent form and continuing on to the next screen, the participant was made aware that implied consent was given for his or her responses to be used in data collection. The results were collected and then entered into statistical software to analyze the results.



## **CHAPTER 4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Correlation, *t*-test, and regression analyses were run to test the hypotheses and answer the research questions regarding the relationships among personality, SES, goal orientation, teacher-student communication, and academic achievement. Table 1 contains the correlation matrix for all of the All the hypotheses and research questions one and two were examined using Pearson's Correlation. Research questions three and four conducted a regression analysis in order to examine the relationships among multiple variables and not a single relationship between two variables. The findings are summarized below.

Table 1

*Correlation Matrix*

		Correlations							
		Topics	Personal	Social	InstComm	Performance	Learning	Relate	SES
Topics	Pearson Correlation	1	-.223	-.190	.178	.321*	.062	.220	-.038
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.081	.139	.164	.011	.643	.094	.779
	N	63	62	62	63	62	58	59	56
Personal	Pearson Correlation	-.223	1	.180	.083	-.040	-.036	.018	-.267*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.081		.161	.523	.759	.789	.894	.047
	N	62	62	62	62	61	57	58	56
Social	Pearson Correlation	-.190	.180	1	.113	.061	-.059	.105	-.215
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.139	.161		.380	.640	.663	.432	.112
	N	62	62	62	62	61	57	58	56
InstComm	Pearson Correlation	.178	.083	.113	1	.104	.055	.280*	.003
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.164	.523	.380		.414	.678	.029	.980
	N	63	62	62	65	64	60	61	58
Performance	Pearson Correlation	.321*	-.040	.061	.104	1	.176	.269*	.217
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.011	.759	.640	.414		.152	.036	.102
	N	62	61	61	64	75	68	61	58
Learning	Pearson Correlation	.062	-.036	-.059	.055	.176	1	.366**	.077
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.643	.789	.663	.678	.152		.005	.581
	N	58	57	57	60	68	70	58	54
Relate	Pearson Correlation	.220	.018	.105	.280*	.269*	.366**	1	.018
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.094	.894	.432	.029	.036	.005		.894
	N	59	58	58	61	61	58	62	55
SES	Pearson Correlation	-.038	-.267*	-.215	.003	.217	.077	.018	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.779	.047	.112	.980	.102	.581	.894	
	N	56	56	56	58	58	54	55	59

\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

\*\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

## **LGO, PGO, and Communication with Instructor**

Hypothesis One stated that both learning goal orientation and performance goal orientation would lead to more frequency of communication with instructor. This hypothesis was not supported. Neither LGO nor PGO was a statistically significant predictor of frequency of communication with instructor (see Table 2). Researchers had assumed that regardless of whether the motivation for communicating was for enlightenment and self-worth (LGO) or for seeking approval and avoiding negative thoughts (PGO), communication with the instructor would still be present. The results show that this was not necessarily the case. Those who were more motivated to pursue educational achievement because of a desire to learn and for enlightenment were not necessarily pursuing communication with their instructor. The same is true for their performance-driven counterparts. Those who were motivated solely by pursuing a grade for positive feedback or for avoiding negative feedback were not communicating nearly as much as anticipated either. Because PGO and LGO are not at opposite ends of a continuum, but rather two types of motivation that can be experienced simultaneously, it is important to remember that the nature of the constructs themselves could have an impact.

Table 2

*Regression Results for Goals Predicting Communication Before/After Class and Office Visits***Model Summary**

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.195 <sup>a</sup>	.038	.005	18.154

a. Predictors: (Constant), Learning, Performance

**ANOVA<sup>a</sup>**

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1 Regression	755.734	2	377.867	1.147	.325 <sup>b</sup>
Residual	19114.627	58	329.563		
Total	19870.361	60			

a. Dependent Variable: BefAfClass

b. Predictors: (Constant), Learning, Performance

**Coefficients<sup>a</sup>**

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	-20.043	23.983		-.836	.407
	Performance	.403	.306	.170	1.316	.193
	Learning	.212	.294	.093	.720	.475

a. Dependent Variable: BefAfClass

**Model Summary**

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.085 <sup>a</sup>	.007	-.028	11.521

a. Predictors: (Constant), Learning, Performance

**ANOVA<sup>a</sup>**

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1 Regression	54.820	2	27.410	.207	.814 <sup>b</sup>
Residual	7565.613	57	132.730		
Total	7620.433	59			

a. Dependent Variable: Office

b. Predictors: (Constant), Learning, Performance

Table 2. Continued.

*Regression Results for Goals Predicting Communication Before/After Class and Office Visits*

Coefficients <sup>a</sup>					
Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	12.721	15.273		.833	.408
1 Performance	-.125	.195	-.085	-.643	.523
Learning	.002	.190	.002	.013	.990

a. Dependent Variable: Office

For Project GRAD Knoxville, this means that giving students who are motivated, either by a desire to learn or performance, a reason to communicate with their instructors is necessary. The organization needs to consider ways to offer incentives for communicating with their instructors, and those methods will change based upon a student's orientation. It is necessary to keep those differences in mind. If the organization is attempting to motivate a LGO student with extrinsic rewards, they are not likely to be very successful. The same is true for PGO students. Giving them the ideas that this is an incredible learning opportunity, etc. will not likely be effective motivational methods. If those students are experiencing both LGO and PGO simultaneously, it would stand to reason that a blend of the two types of incentives would need to be used. Since out-of class communication has been linked with higher levels of academic performance (Terenzini, Pascarella, & Bliming, 1996) and higher rates of persistence (Aylor & Opplinger, 2003), it would stand to reason that the organization would want to encourage its students to pursue communication with their instructors even further, regardless of their orientation.

Specifically concerning the given results, it stands to reason that even though there is not a typical correlation between the two variables and frequency of communication with instructor, there could be a more complex relationship that is present. Perhaps the relationship is curvilinear. If that is the case, students on either end of the spectrum might not be as different as had been previously assumed, both for LGO and PGO, especially considering the fact that students with LGO and PGO can experience both motivations simultaneously (Button, Mathieu, & Zajac, 1996; Eison, Pollio, & Milton, 1986). It could be that LGO and PGO are more situational than trait-based, and, thus, there does not appear to be a relationship. Perhaps a person's motivation is not deeply engrained in who they are, but rather, it is something that is adapted based upon situation. Those that responded with answers that put them at the ends of the spectrum makes the data appear that there is not a relationship, but it could be that the relationship is more complex than a typical correlation. Further research should examine this relationship further and seek to understand if the relationship is more complex, or if there is not a relationship present at all.

This particular hypothesis sought to examine the frequency of communication occurring with the instructor sought out by both LGO and PGO students. It is important to consider that although frequency may or may not differ between the two groups, there could be a difference in quality of interaction or content that this study did not examine. Further research is needed to seek out what findings those inquiries would lead to.

### **Personality and Communication with Instructor**

Hypothesis Two stated that when a student scores high on extroversion, he or she would also score high on frequency of communication with instructor. Hypothesis Two was not supported ( $t = 1.084$ ,  $p = \text{n.s.}$  for before or after class visits;  $t = -.461$ ,  $p = \text{n.s.}$  for office visits). While this hypothesis was not statistically significant, the results may have practical significance

for Project GRAD as students who preferred a less extroverted educational environment also scored higher on before and after class communication encounters with an instructor ( $M = 16.27$  vs.  $M = 11.50$ ).

Hypothesis Three stated that when a student scores high on openness to experience, he or she would also score high on frequency of communication with instructor. Hypothesis Three was not supported ( $t = .009$ ,  $p = \text{n.s.}$  for before or after class visits;  $t = -.901$ ,  $p = \text{n.s.}$  for office visits). While the mean number of before/after class and office visit communication encounters for those who were more or less open to new experiences was similar, the more interesting practical finding for Project GRAD is likely that so few of their students preferred an educational environment that exposes them to new experiences.

When considering the acquired results, it is necessary to consider that the entirety of the extroversion and openness scales was not used. Additionally, the scale was originally meant to measure personality in professional settings. In reality, however, the questions did not deeply seek to understand the individual, but rather, preferred external surroundings. Seeing a lack of significance in the findings, and the low reliability of the scales, researchers chose to use the scale as a grouping variable rather than using it for its predictive value. From doing so, it was seen that those who were less extroverted (answered yes to 3 or fewer questions) communicated with their instructors an average of 21.6 times per semester. Those who were more extroverted (answered yes to 4 or more questions) communicated with their instructors an average of 18.5 times per semester. Thus, a lack of communication does not indicate the lack of significance. Communication is reportedly occurring, but it is not statistically significantly linked to personality scores which could be a result of lack of reliability in measurement.

Considering extroversion, it was noted that when all items except number 7 were removed from the scale, there was a significant relationship between that item and communication with instructor. Since the item indicated a person's preference working on long-term versus short-term projects, this would imply that as students are given long-term projects, their likelihood of communicating with their instructors increases. However, this was the case only for one of the items. Overall, the relationship between extroversion and frequency of communication is not a significant relationship. Thus, the relationship between extroversion and education is not a key predictor. This could be in part, because the scale was created to measure personalities considering work experiences and environments. This study adapted the measure to apply to an educational setting, but it appeared to measure more of ideal external circumstances rather than the individual's actual characteristics. Consequently, the typical idea of extroversion as being outgoing and energized by action with others did not appear to be accurately measured. Perhaps that is yet another explanation as to why there was not an apparent relationship between extroversion and communication frequency with instructor.

Considering openness to experience, the same was likely true. The scale measured external circumstances rather than internal preferences. Yet another explanation, then, is a lack of participants who identified themselves as open to new experiences. Only 19 participants, out of 71 participants that responded to that set of questions indicated that they fell on the high end of the openness scale. This could be yet another reason that there was a lack of significance seen in the relationship between openness to experience and communication frequency.

Because personality is not something that Project GRAD Knoxville can effectively alter for students, it is simply important to have an understanding of a student's personality and how that relates to the overall experience of students rather than seeking to change it in any way.



## Sex Differences in Teacher Communication Frequency

Hypothesis Four states that women report more frequent interactions with teachers than men. This hypothesis was not supported. There was a relationship present, but not one that was statistically significant (Male:  $M = 17.22$  for before or after class visits;  $M = 7.85$  for office visits; Female:  $M = 11.96$  for before or after class visits;  $M = 4.09$  for office visits). In fact, the relationship, although not statistically significant, appeared to be opposite of what was hypothesized. Men reported more frequent interactions with their instructors than women. This was true both for conversations with instructor either before or after class and true of visits to the instructor's office. This finding is quite interesting because it is not congruent with previous research. Women have been shown to participate in more activities that contribute to their overall learning (Sander, 2012), which would lead one to believe that they would communicate with their instructors more frequently than men.

Sander (2012) also found, though, that men can, at times, have more frequent engagement with their instructors as they follow up on assignments. Perhaps this is why they are communicating more frequently with their instructors; not necessarily because they want to pursue this frequent communication, but because they are required to have follow-up appointments receiving feedback. If that is the case, the communication that would take place may not be contributing toward their learning, but simply what is needed to earn a better grade. Perhaps the communication is not assisting the student's learning at all, although it can lead to higher levels of academic achievement. With the large gap that was present, however, in a relatively small data set, there was not statistical significance. The lack of statistical significance that is present may also be due to the small sample size that was present.

## **Socio-Economic Status, Probation, and Teacher Relationships**

Research Question One asked about the relationship between socio-economic status and probationary status. For this question, the scale created from immediate household members' employment status did not produce a statistically significant result ( $t = .605, p = \text{n.s.}$ ). Research Question Two asked about the relationship between socio-economic status and student-teacher relationships. The results again showed no statistically significant relationship between the two ( $r = -.037, p = \text{n.s.}$ ) Considering the results, it is important to determine why the results have not shown a relationship between the given constructs.

As seen in the literature describing socio-economic status, the construct itself is incredibly difficult to define (Sirin, 2005; White, 1982). When some describe socio-economic status, they are referring to only income. Others focus on lifestyle. Still others focus on community. As a result, with such different and distinct definitions of SES, it can be seen why the construct itself cannot effectively be measured. So many measurement tools have been created to seek to examine the differing definitions of SES, that even attempting to measure it can, at times, be frustrating. Again, it is important to remember the stance taken by White, et al. (1993):

Because researchers use different definitions of SES, measure student achievement in different ways, study a variety of age groups, use different types of analytical methods, use both aggregate and individual data, and conduct studies during years of varying national economic health, it is not surprising to find studies reporting such different results (p. 329).

This study seems to be no different. For the purposes of this study, questions were taken from items included in the census and typical SES demographic questions suggested for use from

SurveyMonkey. Since there was no significance in the relationships tested, it would seem that this study experienced the same lack of exactness in attempting to measure SES based upon a lack of clarity concerning the construct.

It is also important to consider that socio-economic status, in terms of the students that the organization serves, has not been reevaluated since the organization's inception. When the organization was put into the community, the students were from a low SES at the time. Since the organization's inception, there have been national economic changes as well as changes in the community that the organization serves. Thus, the original evaluation of students served by the organization could now be slightly different, either from a higher or lower SES, since the students and communities served have not been reevaluated.

The results gained from this particular study, although not statistically significant, may have practical significance for an organization such as Project GRAD because both relationships appear to be inverse. That would suggest that there is a slight chance that as socio-economic status gets lower, the likelihood of a student being on academic probation does appear to increase. Similarly, as socio-economic status gets higher, the likelihood of student having a positive relationship with his or her teacher appears to decrease. While these statements are not statistically significant relationships as shown by this study, it is an area for further research. The apparent negative relationship between the constructs could be in part due to a difficulty in measurement. Perhaps with a more exact tool, the relationship could be better defined.

Based upon what the organization knows and has revealed through its publications (website, etc.), the results of this study appear to be more subjective rather than objective. The population of students served by Project GRAD Knoxville is typically not one that would be defined as middle class, according to the organization's publications and the College and Career

Access Coach at the organization. Half of the total respondents reported themselves as middle or upper middle class when asked to self-identify. Researchers believe that students would have self-identified in this way because of self elevation. As humans, there is a tendency to believe that oneself is good and better than others. This could be a result of the responses given from participants. This area needs to be taken into further consideration when examining the impact of socio-economic status for this particular population.

Since there was not a statistically significant relationship seen between SES and probationary status or student-teacher relationships, it could be not that the measure was incorrect, but that there is not, in fact, a relationship present. If that is the case, those findings are encouraging. They communicate that it at least appears that post-secondary institutions are not disproportionately disadvantaging students that are from a lower socio-economic status, which can be used by the organization to encourage those from a lower SES that they can actually attend and complete a higher education degree program.

Since no relationship can effectively be examined concerning socio-economic status, Project GRAD Knoxville should seek to focus on the needs of individual students rather than seeking out a plan of action that will meet all students' needs. Seeking to have an understanding of the nuances and concerns of each student will lead to greater success of the students and the organization as a whole. At times, students' socio-economic status may directly impact their academic achievement and relationships with teachers, which could especially be true in times of crisis. We know this to be the case because of all the crisis intervention plans that are outlined for school personnel (Sorensen, 1989; Thompson, 1990). When a student is undergoing a crisis situation, that crisis is likely going to have an impact on that student not only personally, but also academically. Thus, school personnel have training programs in place for times such as these.

The organization needs to become familiar with and skilled at listening for what each student's needs are in encouraging him or her to be successful since there is not an effective way to make a specific plan of action for the entire population.

### **Indicators of Teacher-Student Relationships**

Research Question Three asked what combination of socio-economic status, student orientation, and personality best predicts how students communicate in the student teacher relationships. Due to the problems with the personality construct, it was deleted for analysis purposes. The results show a statistically significant relationship among the variables (see Table 3). If a student has a learning orientation ( $r = .356, p = .01$ ) or if the student is communicating more frequently before or after class with his or her instructor ( $r = .308, p = .05$ ) then that student has a more positive relationship with the instructor. Out of the variance seen in the relationship between teachers and students, 20.5 percent can be explained by SES, personality, and orientation. Out of those, the only statistically significant predictor is LGO.

Table 3

*Regression Results for Student-Instructor Relationships***Model Summary**

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.463 <sup>a</sup>	.214	.146	15.66834

a. Predictors: (Constant), SES, InstComm, Learning, Performance

**ANOVA<sup>a</sup>**

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	3080.119	4	770.030	3.137	.023 <sup>b</sup>
	Residual	11292.861	46	245.497		
	Total	14372.980	50			

a. Dependent Variable: Relate

b. Predictors: (Constant), SES, InstComm, Learning, Performance

**Coefficients<sup>a</sup>**

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	43.983	23.592		1.864	.069
	Performance	.308	.280	.147	1.099	.278
	Learning	.668	.271	.324	2.463	.018
	InstComm	.159	.081	.259	1.964	.056
	SES	-.227	.594	-.051	-.382	.704

a. Dependent Variable: Relate

These findings make sense. It would stand to reason that the more a student had a desire to learn rather than just see a grade as an outcome, the relationship with the instructor would be more developed. Since this type of interaction has been linked with higher levels of learning (Dobransky & Frymier, 2004) and students who set higher goals for themselves (Pascarella, 1980; Pascarella & Terrenzini, 1991), the results are expected. Additionally, it would stand to reason that frequency of communication with instructor would be positively related to the

teacher student relationship. The more students are communicating with their instructors, the more positive the relationship that would be seen between them. Specifically for Project GRAD Knoxville, this means that students to be encouraged to pursue the opportunity to communicate with their teachers regularly and frequently.

### **Indicators of Academic Achievement**

Research Question Four asked what combination of SES, student orientation, personality, and student-teacher interaction best predicts a student's academic achievement. In this case, probation was used as an approximation of academic achievement and personality was removed from the prediction equation. The logistic regression results indicate that if you know a student's LGO and how much of their time they spend talking about social topics with their instructor, you can accurately predict whether they will end up on academic probation 64 percent of the time. Additionally, 17 percent of the variance in GPA is explained by SES, personality, and orientation, none of which is a statistically significant indicator. These findings suggest that those who have a high LGO and spend a large amount of time talking with their instructors about social topics are more likely to be on academic probation. Those who have a PGO are motivated by the fact that they want to earn a good grade. Consequently, they are less likely to end up on academic probation. It is, however, still important to remember the small sample size, lack of statistical power, and the difficulty in measuring so many variables. These relationships should be examined further in an attempt to replicate them.

These results, although they make sense, are a bit surprising considering the fact that those with a LGO have reported better achievement than those with a PGO (Page & Alextich, 2001). It would appear that those with a desire to learn would not be the ones who would end up on academic probation. However, because PGO students are motivated by the grades that they

earn, it acts as an insurance policy, keeping them from ending up on probation. They care about their grades and fear negative responses from others (Elliott 1994). Those who have a LGO do have an inherent desire to learn, but they care more about learning than they do about achievement scores. If he or she is learning, the LGO student would be satisfied regardless of GPA or his or her academic probationary status.

### ***Post Hoc Analyses***

Results from this study showed three major unexpected outcomes that were not originally examined in the hypotheses/research questions. First, because of their unreliable status and questionable validity, SES and personality were dropped from the subsequent research questions that involved them. Because SES has been identified as being extremely difficult to measure, researchers did not want it negatively affecting the subsequent research questions in any way. Personality was removed because of its lack of reliability seen in the alpha reliability values. After both measures of those two constructs were removed, orientation, student-teacher communication relationship, frequency of communication, and achievement were the items that were examined in research questions three and four.

Second, this study also showed that students who spent more time talking about course information with their instructors were more likely to be performance oriented. This finding makes sense considering the fact that those who have a PGO are much more likely to want to do whatever it takes to complete the given task. PGO students have been shown to take shortcuts in their work to gain the highest grade for the least amount of work (Williams & Frymier, 2007). Students with this type of orientation do not have time to sit and talk with their instructors about personal or social issues. They only want to know what is necessary to get the highest grade



possible. Thus, they will be the ones the instructor talks most frequently with concerning course topics.

Finally, a relationship was seen between sex and performance goal orientation (women: 55.9, men 51.3). Women were considerably more performance oriented than their male counterparts. Sander (2012) has indicated that women spend more time preparing for class and often work harder on the front end of the assignment to turn in a piece that is flawless. They also experience more stress and less confidence than men (Sander, 2012). Perhaps this is why females are more performance oriented than males. Future research should investigate this relationship and see if gender and sex roles contribute to this relationship.

## CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSIONS

One of the main conclusions of this study that contributes to the overall literature is that socio-economic status is growing increasingly difficult to measure. Considering the fact that the country has recently come out of an economic recession, the definitions of what makes each social class stratified are becoming much more difficult to define. The lines between groups of people have blurred. The definitions of socio-economic status have grown to include so many aspects that measuring it as a construct has become incredibly difficult. This study has shown that to be the case yet again. Until the society as a whole comes up with a proper definition of what socio-economic status really is, it will be incredibly difficult to measure.

Yet another conclusion of this study is a somewhat reliable method of predicting whether or not students will end up on academic probation. Considering the fact that postsecondary institutions most likely attain to increase graduation and persistence, it would stand to reason that those same institutions would want to be aware of trends leading towards students on academic probation. By knowing a student's score on LGO and amount of time spent talking to instructors about social topics these institutions can predict the likelihood of a student ending up on academic probation 64% of the time.

Overall, this study adds to the general body of knowledge concerning LGO, PGO, student-teacher relationships, and overall achievement. Relationships were apparent even given the small sample size and difficulty in measurement.

## **CHAPTER 6 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

This study had several limitations. First, personality scales were measured using only “yes” or “no” responses. There was not enough variation in responses to achieve highly reliable scores for both of the personality scales. This is most likely due to the fact that the entirety of the personality scale was not administered in this study. Only the questions measuring extroversion and openness to experience were used. Additionally, participants were asked to respond with either “yes” or “no” rather than using a Likert-type scale for more variation in responses. The measure of personality was determined to have been a limitation of the study and consequently thrown out because of the lack of reliability. Additionally, personality is something that the Project GRAD Knoxville cannot change, and thus does not do much to serve the organization rather than having an understanding of it.

There were several other variables along with personality that could have been changed or eliminated in some way to better measure the goals of students and how those goals are related to achievement. For example frequency of communication could not necessarily measure the quality of a communication interaction. A better understanding of quality could have been more insightful rather than a simple measure of frequency. Also, extra-class communication could have been better considered a measure of achievement if also linked to in-class communication. Perhaps students are not engaging in ECC because they are getting their questions answered in class. Engagement both in and out of class would have been a better measure of a student’s class involvement rather than simply extra-class communication. A final limitation of the study was the idea that student’s answers could have been affected by social desirability. They could have felt that their responses would have affected the organization’s view of them even though they were instructed that their responses would not have been linked

to them, and, consequently, could have given their perceptions of desired responses rather than realistic ones.

Future research should give participants more than two response options to achieve more reliable results. Second, there were many surveys that were either not completed or were apparently hurriedly completed that had to be thrown out. Typically, this is due to lack of time or interest on the part of the participant, or length of the survey on the part of the researcher. Future research should offer more randomization in the type of questions asked in order to keep the participant engaged throughout the entirety of the survey. Third, further research should also investigate the sex differences in communication with instructor, and if trends are changing, as results suggest a shift that conflicts past research. Finally, future research should examine the impacts of socio-economic status on achievement and student teacher relationships in an attempt to explain whether or not the relationship is, in fact, not related to the two or only difficult to measure.

## CHAPTER 7 IMPLICATIONS

When considering the implications of this study, it is important to recognize the impact on all of those that are and can be affected by it. First, students are impacted by the research. Students can be impacted by this study in particular by understanding that seeking out quality communication with their instructors, talking about course topics, and understanding ways to avoid academic probation can lead to their overall success. Additionally, students from a low socio-economic background can be encouraged that it does not appear that they are being put at a large disadvantage because of their social status.

Instructors can be impacted by this study as well. Instructors can recognize that when they interact with PGO and LGO students, they need to treat them as individuals. Their motivation is different, and one simple tactic will not work for all students. It is also important to consider that students are not necessarily LGO or PGO. They can experience both motivations simultaneously, and instructors need to adapt their message to individual students' needs. Also, instructors need to continue to turn a blind eye to socio-economic status when interacting with students. Finally, instructors need to take an active role in promoting interactions with students, particularly students that are at risk in some way.

Third, Project GRAD Knoxville (PGK) can take action from the gained information. Project GRAD needs to assist in giving students incentives to communicate with their instructors, especially since there have been past links between quality communication with an instructor and persistence. Also, PGK can encourage students from a lower socio-economic status to pursue a post-secondary educational degree since they do not appear to be disadvantaged by their SES, although it could be due to difficulty in measurement. Finally, the organization should seek out students at risk of ending up on academic probation and offer services and additional support to those students, ensuring that they can be successful.

Finally, universities and post-secondary institutions can keep focusing on the services that are being offered to students. If graduation rates and retention rates are goals of the institutions, it would stand to reason that universities would want to serve the students well. From this study, it would stand to reason that the development of stronger programs to help students navigate the post-secondary educational process along with building confidence would serve both the students and the institutions as well.

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## **APPENDIX**

## **Informed Consent**

You have been asked to complete a survey by Kensey Parker, a graduate student at the University of Tennessee—Knoxville. If you choose to complete the survey, you must be at least 18 years of age or older. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you are not at least 18 years of age, you have received this survey in error. Please exit the survey now. This study aims to learn about your experiences of post-secondary education and how your experience is affected by your communication with your teacher along with your personality characteristics, your motivation, and your engagement.

The survey should take approximately 15 minutes to complete. Your identity will remain confidential and your scholarship will not be affected by whether you participate. Please, feel free to be honest as your individual answers will not be reported to anyone. After the data collection has been done, these survey responses will be destroyed.

### **Potential Risks**

There are no potential risks to this study. If, however, during the survey, you feel uncomfortable, you may exit the survey. There will be no penalty for choosing to not complete the survey. You will maintain your scholarship regardless of whether you complete or exit the survey.

### **Benefits**

The results from this study will be summarized and contributed to the field of communication. Additionally, the results will benefit Project GRAD Knoxville in an effort to better serve the students receiving the scholarship. This is a valuable opportunity for feedback for the organization as it assists in adding the students' voice to the organization.

### **Contact Information**

If, for any reason, you have questions about the study or the procedures, you may contact Kensey Parker at 865-660-8049 or by email at [kenseyparker@yahoo.com](mailto:kenseyparker@yahoo.com). You may also contact the Project GRAD office at 865-525-4030. Finally, if you have questions about your rights as a participant, contact the Office of Research Compliance Officer at (865) 974-3466.

By completing this survey and clicking to the next screen, I agree that I am at least 18 years of age, consent to participate in the study and have my data used. I understand that should I choose to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty for doing so. I maintain my scholarship regardless of whether I complete or exit the survey.

**Please answer yes or no to the following statements about what you would *prefer* your school life to be like. There are no right or wrong answers—be as honest as you can, and do not give an answer because it seems like the right thing to say.**

1. \_\_\_\_\_ It's generally accepted that to get ahead you have to break a few rules.
2. \_\_\_\_\_ I am often the center of attention.
3. \_\_\_\_\_ Quick decision making is favored over taking time to think about issues.
4. \_\_\_\_\_ Competitive people get ahead most quickly.
5. \_\_\_\_\_ The atmosphere is fast and pressured as opposed to calm and steady.
6. \_\_\_\_\_ At times the atmosphere is hectic and rushed.
7. \_\_\_\_\_ Most of the work involves short-term projects instead of long-term ones.
8. \_\_\_\_\_ Deadlines are rarely set—they are seen as limiting.
9. \_\_\_\_\_ If I had a choice, I would rather be the one who comes up with ideas instead of doing them.
10. \_\_\_\_\_ Others are more concerned with expressing themselves rather than identifying with others.
11. \_\_\_\_\_ Others could be described as more creative than practical.
12. \_\_\_\_\_ If I had a choice, I would rather develop new ways of thinking instead of improving standard methods.
13. \_\_\_\_\_ School requires me to spend most of my time in one place rather than moving around a lot.
14. \_\_\_\_\_ I rarely go into school knowing exactly what I'll be doing every hour; I just have a general idea and take things as they come.

**Please write a number next to each statement to indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with that statement. (1=Disagree Strongly to 7=Agree Strongly)**

Disagree Strongly	Disagree Moderately	Disagree a little	Neither agree nor Disagree	Agree a little	Agree moderately	Agree strongly
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

1. \_\_\_\_\_ I prefer to do things that I can do well rather than things that I do poorly.
2. \_\_\_\_\_ I'm happiest at work when I perform tasks on which I know that I won't make any errors.
3. \_\_\_\_\_ The things I enjoy the most are the things I do the best.
4. \_\_\_\_\_ The opinions others have about how well I can do certain things are important to me.
5. \_\_\_\_\_ I feel smart when I do something without making any mistakes.
6. \_\_\_\_\_ I like to be fairly confident that I can successfully perform a task before I attempt it.
7. \_\_\_\_\_ I like to work on tasks that I have done well on in the past.
8. \_\_\_\_\_ I feel smart when I can do something better than most other people.
9. \_\_\_\_\_ Even if I know that I did a good job on something, I'm satisfied only if others recognize my accomplishments.
10. \_\_\_\_\_ It's important to impress others by doing a good job.

**Please write a number next to each statement to indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with that statement. (1=Disagree Strongly to 7=Agree Strongly)**

1. \_\_\_\_\_ The opportunity to do challenging work is important to me.
2. \_\_\_\_\_ When I fail to complete a difficult task, I plan to try harder the next time I work on it.
3. \_\_\_\_\_ I prefer to work on tasks that force me to learn new things.
4. \_\_\_\_\_ The opportunity to learn new things is important to me.
5. \_\_\_\_\_ I do my best when I'm working on a fairly difficult task.

6. \_\_\_\_\_ I try hard to improve on my past performance.
7. \_\_\_\_\_ The opportunity to extend the range of my abilities is important to me.
8. \_\_\_\_\_ When I have difficulty solving a problem, I enjoy trying different approaches to see which one will work.
9. \_\_\_\_\_ On most jobs, people can pretty much accomplish whatever they set out to accomplish.
10. \_\_\_\_\_ Your performance on most tasks or jobs increases with the amount of effort you put into them.

**When answering this next set of questions, please think about your instructors and classes from last semester. Give the best summary that you can. Try not to think about any one teacher or class. Respond about your typical behavior.**

1. How many times have you ever spoken with your instructor either before or after class? \_\_\_\_\_  
*\*If you answer was 0, do not answer the next two questions. Move to the next section.*
2. How many times have you visited the instructor's office this semester? \_\_\_\_\_  
*\*If you answer was 0, do not answer the next question. Move to the next section.*
3. Estimate the percent of conversation time spent on the topics listed below during all visits to the instructor's office (not to exceed 100% total)

Course Topics and Assignments \_\_\_\_\_ %  
 Personal Problems or Advice Seeking \_\_\_\_\_ %  
 Socializing \_\_\_\_\_ %

**Continue to think about your experience from last semester. Please write a number next to each statement to indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with that statement. (1=Disagree Strongly to 7=Agree Strongly)**

1. \_\_\_\_\_ I have a good relationship with my instructors.
2. \_\_\_\_\_ I have often spoken with my instructors before class.
3. \_\_\_\_\_ I have often communicated electronically with my instructors outside of class.
4. \_\_\_\_\_ When I run into my instructors, they often stop to talk.
5. \_\_\_\_\_ I feel comfortable approaching my instructors outside of class.
6. \_\_\_\_\_ My instructors encourage students to drop by their offices.
7. \_\_\_\_\_ My instructors seem more like a friend than a superior.
8. \_\_\_\_\_ My instructors seem more like a "regular person" in the office.
9. \_\_\_\_\_ My instructors seem to have limited time for my concerns when I email them or visit their office.
10. \_\_\_\_\_ When I visit my instructors' offices, they let me talk about anything I want.
11. \_\_\_\_\_ I usually don't discuss my personal life with any instructors.
12. \_\_\_\_\_ When speaking to instructors, I keep statements about my personal life brief.
13. \_\_\_\_\_ Sometimes my instructors talk about their personal life during office visits.
14. \_\_\_\_\_ Most office visits are useful educational experiences.
15. \_\_\_\_\_ After talking with my instructors outside of class, I like him/her better.
16. \_\_\_\_\_ After talking with my instructors outside of class, I like the course more.
17. \_\_\_\_\_ Visiting with my instructors outside of class has improved my motivation in courses.
18. \_\_\_\_\_ Visiting with my instructors outside of class has improved my confidence in courses.
19. \_\_\_\_\_ Communicating electronically with my instructors has improved my motivation in courses.
20. \_\_\_\_\_ Communicating electronically with my instructors has improved my confidence in courses.
21. \_\_\_\_\_ I communicated with my high school instructors more than I do in college.

In which type of housing did you grow up? (*check which one most closely resembles your experience*)

- |                                      |  |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Apartment   | <input type="checkbox"/> Houseboat           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Condominium | <input type="checkbox"/> Military Housing    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Townhouse   | <input type="checkbox"/> Mobile Home         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Duplex      | <input type="checkbox"/> Single-family house |

How would you classify your family while you were in high school? (*check which one most closely resembles your experience*)

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Upper Class        | <input type="checkbox"/> Working Class |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Upper Middle Class | <input type="checkbox"/> Working Poor  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Middle Class       | <input type="checkbox"/> Poor          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Lower Middle Class |  |

Does anyone in your immediate household currently receive food stamps? (*circle one*)

Yes                      No                      I Don't Know

Is anyone in your immediate household currently receiving Medicare or Medicaid benefits? (*circle one*)

Yes                      No                      I Don't Know

How many people in your immediate household are (18+ family members only): (*circle one*)

Employed for wages	0	1	2	3+
Self-employed	0	1	2	3+
Out of work and looking for work	0	1	2	3+
Out of work but not currently looking for work	0	1	2	3+
Stay-at-home parents	0	1	2	3+
Students	0	1	2	3+
Retired	0	1	2	3+
Unable to work	0	1	2	3+

Age: \_\_\_\_\_ Sex: (*circle one*)    MALE                      FEMALE

Have you ever been on academic probation or at risk of losing scholarship money because of your GPA? (*circle one*)

YES                      NO

What is your race?(*check one*)

- |                                   |  |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Black    | <input type="checkbox"/> Multiracial           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> White    | <input type="checkbox"/> Other                 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Hispanic | <input type="checkbox"/> Prefer not to respond |

Type of institution: (*check one*)

- ☐ 4 year institution  
☐ 2 year institution  
☐ Trade/Technical School

**If you answered trade/technical:**

Are you in good academic standing? \_\_\_\_\_

How many times have you renewed your Project GRAD Scholarship? \_\_\_\_\_

**If you answered 2 year or 4 year institution:**

What is your GPA? \_\_\_\_\_

Year in school:          Freshman          Sophomore          Junior          Senior

## VITA

Kensey Parker was born in Knoxville, Tennessee to the parents of Tim and Lee Ann Parker. She is one of two daughters, the younger sister of Hannah. She attended Berean Christian School from kindergarten all throughout middle school. She then entered and graduated from Fulton High School, also in Knoxville. Upon graduation, she enrolled at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville where she completed a Bachelor's Degree of Arts in Communication Studies in May of 2011. She then applied and was accepted to the Graduate School at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. She was awarded a graduate teaching assistantship, overseeing the internships for the School of Communication Studies. She completed a Master's Degree of Science in Communication and Information with a concentration in Communication Studies in May 2013. She is entering the full-time work force with aspirations to continue to give back to college students through teaching and other types of academic and social support.